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PROGRAMME PLANNING

Country and intercountry programmes and projects

FIFTH COUNTRY PROGRAMME FOR THE SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC

Note by the Administrator

I. THE PROGRAMMING PROCESS

1. The preparatory process for the formulation of the fifth country programme spanned a period of 20 months beginning with the mid-term review of the fourth country programme in April 1990.

2. The mid-term review set the initial conceptual and operational framework for the fifth country programme by recommending that certain substantive areas, such as the environment and basic education, receive greater emphasis in the future programme. The mid-term review contributed further to the formulation of the future programme by recommending that the profile of UNDP cooperation become more programmatic and that efforts be made to increase national execution so that UNDP-supported efforts might have greater impact on national capacity-building.

3. More specific areas of concentration for UNDP fifth cycle assistance evolved from a series of reviews, assessments and consultations between the Government, UNDP and a number of United Nations agencies. Other forums such as the National Workshop on the Environment held in early 1991 provided an opportunity to discuss emerging areas of national priority in need of capacity-building support. A number of programming missions were also staged during the latter half of 1991 by various United Nations agencies including the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the

International Trade Centre (ITC), the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the United Nations Department of Technical Cooperation for Development (DTCD) and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO). These missions intensified the policy dialogue with various sectoral ministries of the Government and helped identify strategic areas where technical cooperation through the United Nations system could have a significant impact on national development efforts. At the field level, there was also a series of consultations with the resident United Nations in-country team comprising FAO, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Food Programme (WFP) and the World Health Organization (WHO), as well as with such other multilateral partners as the European Community (EC) and various bilateral donors on potential areas of collaboration in the next country programme.

4. The Government was a very active partner throughout the preparatory period and UNDP was in constant contact with its national counterpart, the State Planning Commission (SPC), and other sectoral ministries. The UNDP Advisory Note, submitted in October 1991, reflected the frank and privileged relationship UNDP shares with the Government of Syria. After a series of consultations with the Government, the Note's strategy and proposed policy framework was agreed as the thrust of the fifth country programme. A series of intensive meetings between the UNDP field office, the SPC and nearly every sectoral ministry was conducted throughout November and December 1991 to give operational expression to these main areas of concentration.

II. ANALYTICAL COMMENTARY ON THE FIFTH COUNTRY PROGRAMME

5. Major changes in the international arena have had far-reaching implications on the Syrian economy, prompting the Government to initiate a process of economic reform. Within the context of a gradual liberalization of the economy, the expected broad objectives of the unpublished Seventh Five-Year Plan for Syria include: (i) increasing personal income and improving standards of living; (ii) achieving a higher rate of self-sufficiency; (iii) expansion of the role of the private sector; and (iv) reducing the disparity in income and living standards between rural and urban areas.

6. Sensitive policy issues that will be encountered during this critical phase of economic transition include reduction of subsidies; rationalization of prices; administrative reform; increasing efficiency of the public sector; and provision of investment and export incentives to the private sector. Independent advice in addressing these issues will be required. In this respect, UNDP's political and sectoral neutrality make it a particularly important development partner for Syria. This importance is reinforced by the emphasis UNDP places on capacity-building, national self-reliance and human development.

7. The evolving economic conditions faced by the country also highlight the functional comparative advantages of UNDP in Syria; as there is no current national development plan and no detailed national programmes exist, UNDP cooperation will play a greater policy-oriented, "upstream" role by providing support to the development of national strategies upon which national programmes will be based. This will be complemented by assistance targeted at building national capacity in policy development.

8. In line with these advantages of the UNDP mandate and mode of cooperation, and in light of the Government's desire to focus UNDP assistance on areas deemed as top national priorities, the following three main themes have been adopted as a basis for programming UNDP support under the fifth country programme: (i) support to economic policy development and management; (ii) environment and natural resource management; and (iii) development of rural areas through sustainable agricultural production and human resources development.

9. The proposed themes for the fifth country programme respond closely to the development needs and priorities facing Syria in 1992.

10. For the first area, while the Government is promoting economic growth through a policy of gradual liberalization of the economy in which market forces are increasingly encouraged, it is clear that during a period of transition economic policy management will still reside within the public domain. Consequently, UNDP will support the Government's mixed public/private sector strategy designed to maximize the efficiency of the public sector, promote its links with the private sector and consolidate the establishment of a policy and regulatory framework within which the private sector can operate. UNDP cooperation will also be strategically focused on building national capacity in such key areas of policy development as human resource development, banking and, in particular, the trade sector. Combined with export potential surveys, policy development in trade is expected to result in an integrated national trade development strategy. Complementing this will be support for an improved and increasingly decentralized public sector and the provision of the tools required for effective economic management such as a strengthened national statistical system.

11. Regarding the second area, environment and natural resources management, there have been several encouraging indications of the Government's increasing commitment to addressing environmental issues. UNDP will play a lead role in this area by supporting efforts to strengthen nascent environmental management planning capacity concomitant with developing a comprehensive and integrated environmental master plan for the country, a precursor to a national strategy on environmental management. UNDP assistance will also continue to be provided to improving the sustainable management of Syria's limited water and land resources. This will include support to increased efficiency of water use in irrigated lands in which UNDP's role is well defined within a broader national strategy and support to the development of a land classification system.

12. The third area of concentration, development of rural areas through sustainable agricultural production and human resources development, responds directly to the national development objective of reducing the disparity in income and living standards between rural and urban areas. With agriculture providing 25 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP), and one quarter to one third of total employment, it is clear that a key to raising rural incomes, as well as being able to feed and employ a growing population, is an expansion of agricultural production to greater and sustainable levels. Agricultural production is now subject to wide fluctuations in annual output due to variation in rainfall. In attempting to smooth out these fluctuations, it is clear that improved productivity is vital, particularly in irrigated lands. In addition to its efforts to improve on-farm management of water resources, UNDP will contribute in this area by the dissemination of high-yielding, irrigation-based technologies through a strengthened research and extension system. Support will also be provided to agricultural interventions having a direct effect on the incomes of small- and medium-scale farmers. Finally, UNDP will continue to support the Government's efforts to enhance human resource development in rural areas particularly with regard to women through literacy and vocational training. A continued and special emphasis will be placed on reducing the high rate of population growth in Syria.

13. In addition to addressing the major national development priorities of Syria, the fifth country programme also reflects the areas of focus for UNDP capacity-building outlined in Governing Council decision 90/34. Technology transfer and technical cooperation among developing countries (TCDC) cut across the programme as a whole. While women in development will be mainstreamed into each area of concentration, assistance will also be provided to address such specific areas as the high rate of women's illiteracy in rural areas. Management development is featured in economic management and in environment and natural resources management, while poverty eradication and grass-roots participation is particularly relevant to the development of rural areas. Although environment and natural resources management is a separate area of concentration, an environmental dimension will be incorporated into all UNDP interventions.

III. MANAGEMENT OF COUNTRY PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTATION

14. While the absence of a national development plan and detailed national programmes precludes the fifth country programme following a comprehensive programme approach, by providing support to the development of national strategies from which national programmes will be derived in such critical areas as trade, environment, human resources development and national statistics, UNDP will be fulfilling a key function in helping the Government move towards such an approach and ensuring that its assistance has maximum impact on the country's national development objectives.

15. UNDP and the Government are committed to increasing national execution and are using the fifth cycle as an opportunity to expand this modality in a

cautious and measured way. In this context, a joint UNDP/Government committee has been formed to assess the suitability of this modality for execution of proposed activities. A national workshop on national execution is also being organized for early 1992 in order to better acquaint key counterparts with the operation of this modality. Specialized agencies will continue to be closely associated with all stages of the programme and project cycles and implementing specific technical components as appropriate. With regards to other execution modalities, although non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Syria are very limited in number and capacity, UNDP will nevertheless attempt to enhance their capabilities by involving them in project implementation wherever possible.

16. Improved monitoring and evaluation will play an essential role in enhancing the effectiveness of UNDP cooperation and in reinforcing expanded use of national execution. The country programme will undergo a mid-term review in 1994 in order to allow for any adjustments required in response to changing national priorities. A study of the national monitoring/evaluation system is also contemplated over the period of the country programme.

17. The SPC has the primary responsibility for coordinating external assistance. UNDP proposes to strengthen the SPC's coordinating capacity by submitting within the framework of the fifth country programme comprehensive action plans and programmes in the various areas of concentration which will also help identify external assistance requirements.

IV. RECOMMENDATION OF THE ADMINISTRATOR

18. In summary, the proposed fifth country programme for Syria addresses the key development issues confronting the country as it enters a period of economic transition. The programme is based on the comparative advantages of UNDP in Syria and is formulated with a view to maximize UNDP support to national capacity-building efforts and development of national strategies upon which national programmes will in part be based. The programme is focused on major national development priorities while reflecting the thematic concerns of UNDP. The programme also retains a measure of flexibility to respond to evolving needs during such a period of transition.

19. The Administrator, therefore, recommends that the Governing Council approve the fifth country programme for the Syrian Arab Republic.